



ISSUE XI: DECEMBER, 2019

**Letter from the Editor:**

Brothers and Sisters!

I'm so excited about this special issue of the Right2Vote Report. It's been my vision throughout this year to publish a magazine for my readers. The Right2Vote Report has been a small pamphlet that some of you have had to struggle to read for months and I'm grateful for your patience and support as this publication expands.

As I hinted in the last issue, we will be partnering with Issue Voter in order to facilitate a dialogue between our incarcerated readers and state legislators.

Within the Reports you will find updates on legislation as well as information for corresponding legislators. We will be encouraging readers to write legislators in support of advancing prisoners' initiatives. At any point if you or a peer would like to write a letter to your representative (even if you aren't sure of their name) send your message to SawariMedia and it will be addressed appropriately, scanned and forwarded to the right representative. Too often prisoners are forced to resort to violence because legitimate pathways of communication are blocked. We want to alleviate this issue and receive your messages to representatives so that we can keep a record and hold them accountable to respond to prisoners, as their constituents. In addition to this you will also find legal affidavit forms to submit to the Prisoner Legal Advocacy Network in cases of neglect, abuse or retaliation in order to bypass the prisons corrupt grievance procedures. The Right2Vote Report magazine will also include a resource list in every issue. If there is a group you are interested in connecting with that is mentioned in the Report, please check the resource list.

Right2Vote is not a reform, it is a call for systematic change. As Laciño writes within, too often our energy is wasted advocating for reforms that have little to no positive impact or material relief for the most oppressed classes. Right2Vote is a demand that power is transferred back into those marginalized communities. We advocate for power, not for small reforms. While others scrounge for crumbs under the table, we are building out our own dining hall. I cannot do it alone, this is a potluck and I'm calling on each of you to bring a dish to the table. You are all responsible to being great. Please engage with this report beyond simply reading it alone, share it with others. The report is free, so please encourage others to subscribe. If you have friends incarcerated in other parts of the country, let me know and I would love to send them a newsletter. We welcome all new subscriptions and as we shift into the new year, my goal is to reach 10k subscribers before the end of 2020. Can you help me make that happen?

In Solidarity,  
Amanti Sawari  
@Sawarimi  
PO Box 2278,  
Detroit, MI 48202

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Groundbreaking MUMI Conference.....	2
Voting Rights Could Improve Conditions, Reduce Violence in NY State Prisons .....	5
Voting Rights Advocate Talks About Potentially Restoring Parolee, Probationary Voting Right.....	4
No Handouts .....	5
We Cannot Truly Reform The Criminal Justice System Until the Power Imbalance is Corrected.....	5
Submission Info.....	7

These are the NATIONAL DEMANDS of the men and women in federal, immigration and state prisons:

- 1.Immediate improvements to the conditions of prisons and prison policies that recognize the humanity of imprisoned men and women.
- 2.An immediate end to prison slavery. All persons imprisoned in any place of detention under United States jurisdiction must be paid the prevailing wage in their state or territory for their labor.
- 3.Rescission of the Prison Litigation Reform Act, allowing imprisoned humans a proper channel to address grievances and violations of their rights.
- 4.Rescission of the Truth in Sentencing Act and the Sentencing Reform Act so that imprisoned humans have a possibility of rehabilitation and parole. No human shall be sentenced to death by incarceration or serve any sentence without the possibility of parole.
- 5.An immediate end to the racial overcharging, over-sentencing and parole denials of Black and brown humans. Black humans shall no longer be denied parole because the victim of the crime was white, which is a particular problem in Southern states.
- 6.An immediate end to racist gang enhancement laws targeting Black and Brown humans.
- 7.No denial of access to rehabilitation programs for imprisoned humans at their place of detention because of their label as a violent offender.
- 8.State prisons must be funded specifically to offer more rehabilitation services.
- 9.Reinstatement of Pell grant eligibility to prisoners in all US states and territories.
- 10.Recognition of voting rights for all confined citizens serving prison sentences, pre-trial detainees and so-called "ex-felons." Their votes must be counted. Representation is demanded. All voices count!



- > S4260 passes, New Jersey Senate Committee votes in favor of restoring voting rights to 83,000 people on probation and parole
- > S4260 now moves through the Senate for a floor vote on Monday 12/16
- > MassPOWER canvassers did not meet their target for signatures by the 11/20 deadline but continue to push for full restoration in Massachusetts

# MOVEMENT MOVES

PEOPLE | POSITIONS | POWER

## Groundbreaking MUMI Conference: Making & Unmaking Mass Incarceration in Mississippi's Prison Origin



by Amani Sawari December 11, 2019 | [www.sawarimi.org](http://www.sawarimi.org)

This past week organizers, activists, students, professors, reformists and abolitionists from across the spectrum convened at the University of Mississippi's Oxford campus to discuss the status of America's outcomes of deadly sin at the Making and UnMaking Mass Incarceration (MUMI) Conference. With a diverse panel of inspirational and highly qualified speakers over a series of agenda packed days, the event united great minds and aspiring revolutionaries alike in order to tackle the plethora of complexities that exist within America's criminal legal system. Overall, the conference highlighted the undeniable role that many public universities, including Ole Miss, played in building the prison industrial slave complex and continue to play in maintaining it.

### What do Universities owe people who are incarcerated and formally incarcerated?

Historically, access to academia has been viewed as a privilege that prisoners did not have the right to, simply do to their incarceration status. In order to combat this institutions of higher education would need to seek out students in the prison and be intentional about working with DOC to offer their programs to incarcerated students at an affordable cost. Institutions with this type of initiative continue to be few and far between. During The University and the Prison panel, Syrita Steib-Martin, the executive director of Operation Restoration, explained that for decades the Baptist Theological Seminary, which targeted lifers as students to become ministers, was the only higher education opportunity offered to prisoners in Louisiana. Programming that would inspire critical thinking was not encouraged. This history perfectly illustrates the intention of the college, in partnership with DOC, to value the education of prisoners only when that education serves to further sedate the population, not to empower them.

Thankfully, more recently colleges and universities have begun to offer programming in their local penitentiaries. Programs like University Beyond Bars offer college degrees to incarcerated students at Washington State Reformatory and Monroe Correctional Complex through Seattle Central College. However access to accredited college programming in prison is still an anomaly. With the passage of the 1994 Crime Bill's restrictions on pell grant provisions for incarcerated people, access to academia has continued to dwindle. With limitations on Pell Grant funding for prisoners, the burden of responsibility falls solely on the student to pay their tuition, making obtaining an associate or bachelorette degree while in prison virtually impossible. Understanding that limited educational opportunities are a chief contributor to the majority of individuals' incarceration, it is imperative that we dramatically increase the number of educational programs offered to people while in prison.

Unfortunately, current status of academia in our state prisons is predatory as many formally incarcerated students are unable to complete the degrees that they began while incarcerated after their release due to restrictions on them as former felons from the colleges they attended while incarcerated. Michelle Jones, a third-year doctoral student in the American Studies program at New York University, highlighted this problem saying that the university owe their formerly incarcerated students, "Continuity of a college experience that is quality... and a clear pathway to completion". Jones emphasized the fact that any program marketed as a 'college course' should also supply the "conferral of a real credential". Courses that do not supply credits should be marketed as extra-curricular or otherwise.

Jones also stressed the fact that educators coming into the prison must consider that their students' orientation be centered throughout the program, meaning that the experience of their incarceration should be embraced throughout their study. As a caution, for educators entering the prison there must be an understanding of the false autonomy that many wardens have, wardens often choose to limit a student's access to education as punishment. Out of a responsibility to their incarcerated students, educators must be confident in challenging this false autonomy and be empowered to push back on administration in order to protect the quality of the education being provided to their students. Educators should also be open to extending beyond the divisions enforced by the prison by co-collaborating with students that are serving life sentences and virtual life sentences, many of which are deemed ineligible by DOC to participate in educational programming. Educators coming into the prison must enforce their natural, true autonomy over their classes in prison in the same way that they are comfortable to do so at any other institution of higher education.

### Legacies of Slavery

During my presentation I focused on the trends that we've seen in politics throughout 2019, mainly in response to the 2018 National

Prison Strike that birthed the ongoing New Suffrage Movement. It was important for me to illustrate how the increase in outside participation in 2018 amplified the strength of people's participation on the inside. This direct relationship between outside support and inside action is one that we must continue to strengthen. My goal is to connect outside organizers, especially student groups, with inside organizers for guidance and support with upcoming actions.

The need for this was further emphasized during Dan Berger's presentation, an author and an associate professor of comparative ethnic studies at my alma mater the University of Washington. Berger shared a word in the form of voice recording from Stevie Wilson, an organizer incarcerated in Pennsylvania who explained to attendees that participants in the prison resistance movement are like the "two wings of a bird" on which the inside organizer is one wing and the outside organizer is the other, "if you're not connected o someone on the inside right now, your wrong" he continued.

This metaphor resonated deeply with me and many others repeated throughout the conference. As the days continued I was approached by several student groups that were eager to propel forward in their prison resistance work by connecting with inside organizers. Through the Right2Vote Report I'm able to quickly locate and identify potential connections between these groups and my readers, all of which I consider inside activists in their own right, ready for the opportunity for outside collaboration. This is why I am eager to expand the Right2Vote Report's subscription base as well as attend events like these to assist in making those connections. There are multiple ways that student groups can support prison resistance with the resources available on their campuses.

#### **How do we work to involve the people in abolition (because the university is an institution)?**

Colleges and universities are seen as sites for movement building but the this depends on the people within the institution, not the building itself. I concur with the belief that the university plays a essential role in the abolition of prisons, but the university is an institution so we have to think about what roles people within that institution have in the prison resistance movement.

As Right2Vote transitions into a multi-year campaign we are focused on helping students identify their role in the prison resistance movement using the resources available at their college by supporting students in establishing a variety of prisoner support groups depending on the students an their institution's orientation to the Prison Industrial Slave Complex (PISC). Some institutions, like with the University of Mississippi's relationship to Parchman prison, may have a deep historical connection. Other universities like the University of Washington may have direct connections to PISC through state policy. For example, Washington State has passed legislation that require the university to purchase products from Correctional Industries which employs Washington state prisoners at slave labor wages. With these types of relationships still operating between our prisons and colleges, our universities owe prisoners more than just access to college credits. In addition to providing accredited college courses to prisoners, students can support prisoners in a number of ways through forming student groups with a focus on improving prison conditions.

#### **Prisoner Research Aid Group**

One of the simplest approaches that student groups can support prisoners in is through initiating a Prisoner Research Aid Group. This would be perfect for law, english, sociology or arts majors but

is a simple form of support any type of student can easily get started. Prisoners are constantly in search of materials that aren't readily available in their law library. Students can form a group to support prisoners in their state by forming a research aid group to provide reading materials to prisoners by request. Prisoners need help with accessing articles, bills, legislation and other documents that are imperative to their study and students have access to large data basis that usually go under utilized for the majority of their college career. These types of groups should exist at colleges to support prisoners in every state. It can be done by simply creating an email account for digital correspondence (jpay, corrlinks, etc.) and having a PO box for snail mail correspondence. As students receive requests for different types of documents or from portions of books they can simply fill those requests by printing, scanning, copying and pasting the necessary material and mailing or emailing the compiled tasks and replying to prisoners with those documents that they've requested.

There's nothing 'too' radical about initiating a Prisoner Research Aid Group for students who may be on the fence about where they lean. This group guarantees equal access to information, a human right of every person regardless of their incarceration. Students involved in this group who are interested in going deeper may also get involved in a research project to support those incarcerated in their local prison. Types of projects could include budget assessments to support reform policies or case studies for individuals who've been over sentenced or wrongly convicted.

#### **Prison Divestment Group**

As an alternative to the more neutral group described above, students who've identified connections between their university and prison slavery have formed Prison Divestment groups in order to call on their college to divest from the use of prison labor. This is one of the more popular methods that students can use to support incarcerated citizens suffering from labor exploitation in their state. For example, at Harvard students formed the Harvard Prison Divestment Campaign calling on the University to pull out of their prison contracts so long as imprisoned employees are paid slave labor wages.

There are hundreds of public institutions that have policies that maintain the use of prison slavery through mandating that these companies employed by prisoners be used to supply furniture, foods, construction and other products. These institutions do so usually through a lack of transparency. There is a growing movement of students who have identified these draconian policies and are calling out their campuses. The establishment of Divestment Groups force progression towards paying prisoners fair wages. Knowing that it is the student's tuition dollars that pay these costs, it is the students responsibility.

#### **Prisoner Program Support Group**

Prisoner Program Support groups are already in full swing, there are hundreds of religious groups as well as arts and book clubs that have outside members who go into the prison regularly for programming. I would like to see more students take advantage of the opportunity to participate in prisoner programs that allow outside community members to go into the prison. I've been involved in multiple prisoner programs that went inside including a Poetry program and the Black Prisoners Caucus, both of which I was the youngest outside attendee. Prisoners are fueled by interacting with young, passionate people.

These types of opportunities to go inside are rare so we must take full advantage when these types of programs are presented. There are colleges that have programs or events that allow

students to go into the prison on a regular basis in support of an on campus religious, cultural or arts program. I encourage students to seek out these types of programs and events or to create their own. Prisoners meet on the inside regularly for book clubs, poetry reading, strategizing policy and to have many other types of conversations that I'm sure they would be more than happy for outside participants to contribute to.

This may be one of the more difficult types of groups to organize so it may be helpful to start off with establishing a research group or divestment group over the months it may take to plan an organize an inside program. Establishing an inside program would require the most amount of interaction with DOC staff. Programs can be regular (weekly, monthly or quarterly) or can be a one time annual event. Regardless of the frequency, maintaining communication with inside organizers is essential throughout the planning an implementation of the program or event.

## Prison Abolition Group

Finally, one of the more controversial, yet powerful groups would be the creation of a student Prison Abolition Group. Students involved, like those in the Research Aid Group, would be guided by the requests of those prisoners they are supporting. However, rather than solely fulfilling requests for copies of documents, students in the Prison Abolition group would be responsible to prisoners for supporting legislation proposed by their incarcerated comrades. This student group could go by a series of other names like prisoner policy support group, prison condition improvement group, or criminal justice reform focus group. Regardless of the name, this student group would be a prisoner support group that would have an abolitionist focus in the legislation they advocate for. Student advocacy is powerful in politics so it's essential that students' voices are involved in advocacy for legislation committed to prisoners human rights.

It may be difficult for organizers to decide which proposals for legislation to support. During the conference Mariame Kaba, an organizer, educator and founder of Project NIA, provided attendees with a series of guiding questions to use in our advocacy of reforms including:

1. Does it provide material relief?
  2. Does it leave out any marginalized people?
  3. Does it legitimize/expand the system we fight against?
  4. Does it transfer power?
  5. Does it divide people into deserving vs. underserving?
  6. What are the logistics that initiatives enforce?
  7. Does it liberate? Or Oppress?
  8. Is it punitive?

Kaba used the example of police officer body cams that activists advocated for in California. These cams, contrary to popular belief as a ‘helpful’ reform, fail questions 1, 3, 4 and 7 by transferring more power to the criminal legal system that we fight against and by further oppressing marginalized people that continue to suffer from police brutality. Prison Abolition Student Groups, as well as all reformist organizers alike, should review these questions prior to the initiation of any campaigns so that we do not misdirect energy on policies that will lead to further harm in our communities.

## **When's the Next MUMI?**

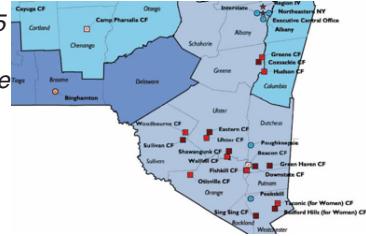
Garrett Felber and his team at the University of Mississippi did an incredible job organizing this groundbreaking event. I am honored to have been invited to speak, to uplift the work of Jailhouse Laywers Speak and to have connected with inspiring organizer-scholars and academics in this field, many of which I've been following on

social media since my college graduation a few years ago. As a student I did not recognize my authority on campus to create movements on behalf of incarcerated people in my state but with this conference that realization was solidified for hundreds of current students. Regardless of one's status as an activist, ally or academic everyone should have a critic of the carceral state. For students who do consider themselves activists or abolitionists this is the next step, to form a group a like-minded individuals on your campus that can build on the work of prison resistance in your state. The resources are there, the people (on both sides of the wall) are ready and I am happy to make a trip to visit any student group that needs help at any phase in establishing a Collaborative Prisoner Support Group. There is great potential for a national initiative of students collaborating on Campaigns in support of prisoners human rights. These student groups can organize the next MUMI conferences on their campuses for future years to come.

I'm ready to get the next five years of conferences on the calendar:) —

# **Opinion: Voting Rights Could Improve Conditions, Reduce Violence in NY Prisons**

*A map of a few of the state's 45 correctional facilities, which at last count collectively held more people than live in 10 of the state's 62 counties.*



by William Fowler November  
19, 2019 | [www.citylimits.org](http://www.citylimits.org)

New York has a chance to provide a major win in a growing movement to restore voting rights to people in prison by becoming the third state permitting people to vote from behind bars. Legislation before the state Senate would allow roughly 50,000 incarcerated New Yorkers to vote in the 2020 presidential election if passed in the next legislative session.

The bill would grant people imprisoned in New York the same legitimate, lawful means used to elect representatives in government and hold those officials accountable. Furthermore, it would diminish the need for people in prison to rely on radical measures to draw attention to their living and working conditions, enabling a more safe environment for inmates and prison staff alike.

Without voting rights, prisoners nationwide are waging nonviolent direct action to fight for better conditions. In 2016, prisoners refused to work for one week, launching the largest prison strike in U.S. history on the anniversary of the Attica Prison uprising. Over 24,000 inmates in 24 states participated, throwing correctional facilities throughout the country into lockdown.

The strike was organized around abolishing “prison slavery,” the practice of forcing prisoners to work for little or no pay made possible by the 13th Amendment. (In New York, prisoners make an average of \$0.65 an hour, which Governor Cuomo supports increasing.)  
cities recognizing the humanity of people in prison. U.S. prisoners went on strike again for two weeks in 2018, coordinating hunger strikes, work stoppages, and commissary boycotts. This time they called for 10 reforms, including an end to prison slavery. The essence of the ten demands may be summed up by their first: immediate improvement of prison conditions and policies rec-

Quite notably, their tenth and final demand called to restore voting rights for incarcerated people. This was initially considered one of the more radical demands, according to Amani Sawari, an organizer with Jailhouse Lawyers Speak, who acted as a spokesperson for the 2018 prison strike. Yet, as Sawari said in *The Atlantic*, the prisoners came to see voting rights as the first step to having “political power over getting all the other demands met.”

As it stands, lawmakers have no reason to listen to prisoners or address their concerns. Nor do prisoners have leverage in gaining their interest. As one inmate in a Missouri prison told Vox, “... policymakers have no reason or incentive to get smart on crime. Imprisoned felons can’t vote so they can’t hold them accountable.” This lack of credibility and accountability explains the prisoners reliance on striking, which is accompanied by often brutal consequences.

In both 2016 and 2018, despite their pleas for human decency, those who organized the strikes from behind bars were retaliated against by correctional staff for engaging in political action. In 2018, they faced “physical abuse, destruction of property, institutional lockdown, and obstruction of access to legal aid, communications, and other resources,” according to Pacific Standard.

Left with no other process for speaking out, these prisoners were forced into making desperate political statements to call attention to their conditions. Yet the retaliation of prison staff only reinforced the violent nature of their environment. In September, Politico reported on new statistics suggesting a rise in violence on Rikers Island despite major investments to reduce such incidents. This isn’t limited to city jails either. Stories collected in a report from Gothamist conveys “a pattern of unrestrained—and often unpunished—brutality and neglect in the past five years alone, spanning many of the state’s 54 prisons.”

In an interview with Democracy Now!, Sawari explained that “...when a conflict arises or when there’s abrasion or tension in the prison, that easily sparks off into violence, because there is no other outlet for these tensions in high-negative-energy circumstances that prisoners are forced to live within.” This lack of credibility and accountability explains the prisoners reliance on striking, which is accompanied by often brutal consequences.

In both 2016 and 2018, despite their pleas for human decency, those who organized the strikes from behind bars were retaliated against by correctional staff for engaging in political action. In 2018, they faced “physical abuse, destruction of property, institutional lockdown, and obstruction of access to legal aid, communications, and other resources,” according to Pacific Standard. Left with no other process for speaking out, these prisoners were forced into making desperate political statements to call attention to their conditions. Yet the retaliation of prison staff only reinforced the violent nature of their environment.

In September, Politico reported on new statistics suggesting a rise in violence on Rikers Island despite major investments to reduce such incidents. This isn’t limited to city jails either. Stories collected in a report from Gothamist conveys “a pattern of unrestrained—and often unpunished—brutality and neglect in the past five years alone, spanning many of the state’s 54 prisons.” In an interview with Democracy Now!, Sawari explained that “...when a conflict arises or when there’s abrasion or tension in the prison, that easily sparks off into violence, because there is no other outlet for these tensions in high-negative-energy circumstances that prisoners are forced to live within.” Such tensions sparked into violence in 1971 when prisoners in Western New York rioted and

took control of the Attica Correctional Facility, taking 42 staff members hostage. This occurrence, known as the Attica Prison uprising, was based on prisoners’ demands for better living conditions and political rights. Once the uprising was over, at least 43 people had lost their lives, including ten staff members and 33 prisoners. At the very least, voting rights would establish a baseline outlet for people in prison to advocate on their own behalf and address tensions before they result in full-blown violence. Elected officials and candidates would have motivation to visit these facilities, to meet with prisoners and prison staff, and better understand the issues within these communities.

This could eventually result in legislation addressing their primary concerns, including issues like underpaid prison labor. But left unchanged, we can only expect more strikes, retaliation, and violence to persist in American prisons at significant costs. Yet right now, New York has a chance to set an example for 47 other states. We have a chance to acknowledge the humanity that prisoners have been denied for over 150 years and the potential to reduce the persistent violence in prison while giving prisoners a means to have their voices heard. However, state legislators are unlikely to act without hearing directly from their constituents. So if you support voting rights for people in prison, encourage your state senator to co-sponsor Senate Bill S6821, restoring the right to vote to incarcerated people in New York State. —

*William Fowler is a resident of New York City and an advocate for expanding voting rights. He works for a New York City agency, but the views expressed here are his own.*

## Voting Rights Advocate Talks About Potentially Restoring Parolee, Probationary Voting Rights

by M.E. Cagnassola | October 30, 2019 | [www.tapinto.net](http://www.tapinto.net)

*More than 80,000 people on parole and probation in New Jersey stand to regain the right to vote following the passage of A-5823. The bill passed through the Assembly on November 25*



ESSEX COUNTY, NJ — Speaking before the New Jersey General Assembly in Trenton on Nov. 25, Assemblyman Jay Webber (R-Morris) called upon his fellow legislators to consider a particular idiom ahead of a vote on a bill to restore voting rights to people on parole and probation upon release.

“There is a reason why we have a saying in our language that is used to denote something that’s absurd. We say: ‘The inmates are running the asylum,’” Webber said. “This bill literally allows the inmates to run the asylum.”

However, Ron Pierce, a Justice & Democracy fellow with the Newark-based New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, and his colleagues don’t think that’s such a bad idea. “The way his system is, I made \$3.50 a day running the recreation department. You have a head chef running the kitchen. So while we don’t have a vote, and we’re making just beyond slave wages, basically we are running it — there’s just staff to oversee,” said Pierce, who graduated from Rutgers-Newark with a degree in justice studies through the New Jersey Transformative Education in Prisons program.

After more than 30 years of not voting due to being incarcerated for murder and paroled, the voting rights advocate is on the precipice of being able to vote again in 2020 following a 46-23-1 vote in favor of bill A-5823 in the state assembly. The bill is sponsored by Democrats Shavonda Sumter (D-Passaic), Cleopatra Tucker of D-Essex, Jamel Holley (D-Union) and Britnee Timberlake of (D-Essex).

"If what [Webber] meant is that people affected by the criminal justice system will now have a say in their democracy and laws that affect them, their families and their communities, we couldn't agree more. That's the point," echoed Hanel Patel, associate counsel for NJSJI, which is spearheading the statewide voting rights restoration campaign #1844NoMore. The campaign is named for the year New Jersey both revoked the voting rights of people with criminal convictions and restricted the vote to white men. Gov. Phil Murphy's anticipated final approval of A-5823 would make New Jersey the 20th state to allow people on probation and parole to vote.

In his work with NJISJ and A-5823's legislative sponsors, Pierce has established himself as a force for change. For him, restoring the right to vote for people with criminal convictions is more a matter of humanity than it is a circumvention of crime and punishment, as the bill's opponents allege.

Recalling the day in Trenton State Prison that he received the letter informing him his voting rights had been rescinded, he mulled over the ways in which the collateral consequence is an act of systemic and continued disenfranchisement. He said his father instilled in him a sense of civic duty and an obligation to his community that has stayed with him as he simultaneously drives forward and awaits a historic legislative decision.

"It was at that moment that I kind of heard my father's voice talking about the community responsibility that I had, and how now I was disconnected from it," Pierce said. "My father was very socially conscious and politically conscious, he instilled in us that we had to be part of the community and give back. He also believed very strongly in not only voting, but in understanding what the community's needs are." That disconnect, as Pierce recalls it, disproportionately affects black people, which make up more than half of the overall 102,000 people in New Jersey who can't vote due to conviction. According to Pierce, losing the right to vote is a barrier to re-entry that weighs heavily on those with convictions and their communities, whose needs are effectively silenced. A political science class Pierce took while in prison demonstrated that many black inmates arrive at prison feeling politically inert

and marginalized. Behind bars, he said that idle time and the political atmosphere of prison create a personal transformation that enlightens social consciousness, giving way to what would be informed voters. But without the right to vote, that enlightenment cannot be released or create change, perpetuating a cycle of recidivism for individuals and underrepresentation for their communities.

"It was there that I decided that was the most important aspect — the most fundamental collateral consequence that is the opening for all other collateral consequences, like housing and education problems, job opportunities — falls under the fact that no one has to listen to you because you can't do anything for them," Peirce said. While more than 80,000 people on probation and parole stand to regain the right to vote as the bill reaches the end of its legislative journey, the work is hardly over. In conjunction with A-5823, which Pierce and his colleagues expect to pass into law, NJSJI is working on legislation (A-3456) that would also extend the vote to 19,000 people who are actively incarcerated.

New Jersey's black prison population has risen to more than 62 percent, and according to Pierce, that number is inflating. To that effect, A-5823 and A-3456 are also essential tools in healing New Jersey's racial disparities and the issues that compound them. In Peirce, who shares in the many collateral consequences of criminal conviction, these issues find a human face to champion their solutions through research and staunch advocacy.

"Ron is a husband, a veteran, a college graduate, and a fierce advocate for social justice and the right to vote. When people talk to him, they understand that we are talking about real human beings whose voices have been silenced," Patel commented. "Due to his own experience, Ron understands on a visceral level how the right to vote can help with rehabilitation and re-entry into society by forging a connection with community — how the vote, as he says, has 'value to the soul,' and should not be tied to the criminal justice system."

Pierce, looking back on his life before his 1986 conviction, reflects fondly upon his family's voting-day tradition of coffee, donuts and spirited debate at his childhood home after everyone cast their ballots. But for right now, he's not making celebration plans for the day he regains his right to participate in elections. "I don't really know what I'll do the day it passes, I really don't. I'm so focused on how close it's coming, and I'm scared to look too far into the future and jinx it," he said. Instead, Pierce said he will continue doing what he does best: helping the people understand what the right to vote means to someone who can't.—



## No Handouts

by Chanton Miles | Gus Harrison Correctional Facility

Can we really visualize freedom with a limited point of view?  
When it's normal to feel free in condition imposed on you.  
When did freedom become a clause, a cause for a certain sect,  
race or class?

Something bestowed, a privilege or a formal accommodation?

Freedom isn't convenience,  
A mutual acclimation between persons or groups,  
Nor is it a means to simplify, ease or comfort.  
Freedom isn't a handout earned for good behavior.  
Freedom isn't a question that's up for debate.

I mean how can you stipulate the very birth right of humanity?  
Package it up and sale it as a gift.  
Blindfold the mind,  
And make the intangible verifiable in a objective sense,  
Confining freedom to the spectrum of untangled chains, broken  
cuffs and open doors.  
Integrated schools, Hospitals and Neighborhoods.

They have us thinking freedom is attached to material things.  
Declarations, Emancipation and Proclamations to explain how  
“they” see it fit.  
Viewing the world through the eyeholes of my oil paintings, I don’t  
see freedom at all.  
I see an extended leash,  
just enough elbow room for your accommodated space.

And as long as poverty is an option freedom can’t coexist.  
Especially when you’re resisting abstract systems,  
Now your desire to survive is thwarting your expression,  
suppressing your ability to create,  
Who knows the greatness of the mind confronted with limited options.  
And we working with bare minimum yet look at the accomplishments.

See freedom really is a Free Dome, unbound by restrictions and  
limitations.  
Its nothing to be lent, extended or given to, it is the essential  
nature the essence of you. P.E.A.C.E...—

BLACK THOUGHTS I BE  
By Sincere Crown Olugbala

**Mailing Info**  
Chanton Miles 619306  
Gus Garrison Correctional Facility  
2727 E Beecher St.  
Adrian, MI 49221



## We Cannot Truly Reform The Criminal Justice System Until the Power Imbalance is Corrected

by Lacino Hamilton | Marquette Maximum Prison

I've been in dialogue with numerous people and groups over the summer, trying to explain that the criminal justice reforms we are witnessing need to be taken with a grain of salt because the fundamental contradiction of the disproportionate distribution of power and privilege, concentrated in the state and its agents, is not being changed nor reformed. With all that is taking place, and I do acknowledge a lot of taking place, the state defining itself as the legitimate negotiator for resolving conflicts, crimes, and harm, and for responding to loss and trauma, and not the family and community, continues to appear normal.

The primary contradiction is not mass incarceration, prosecutorial abuse, militarization of the police, and so on, it's that conflicts, crimes, and harms and an array of State acceptable responses to them came to be treated as property, real estate that the state appropriated for itself. The primary contradiction is that little by little

the family and community was forced to give up its share in taking care of itself, and this includes how it chooses to respond to harm, or what we commonly call crimes. The real problem is that the state has defined itself as the agent in charge of defining when, what to do, and where we act. What this means is, what the state gives (reforms), the state can take (unreform); and what assurances do we have that it will not? Right now, none whatsoever! The power imbalance remains. The state's encroachment, domination, and control of communal competencies has not been resolved, really isn't a topic of discussion or focus of action.

So what criminal justice reforms amount to when you get to the heart of them is the state acting in its own interests, not the family and community interest. And since the state is backed by guns and muscle, by nature a war machine, those interest cannot help but be deprivation of time and space, exclusion, punishment, violence, and execution.

I think most, if not all the criminal justice reforms of the past few years were wonderful, and should be applauded. Human effort to benefit marginalized populations should always be celebrated. But I also think, if we step back and take a long look, and remember criminal justice reform grew out of a desire on the part of social justice activists who are interested in the human community regaining its human dimensions, it's relative status, specifically in its conflict prevention and resolution competencies and processes.

Criminal Justice Reform goals are to foster both personal and collective development, not for the state to give into a reform here or there as if it is some kind of special gift. As a matter of fact, regardless of how great the need is for any particular reform, the state only acts when it will do it the most good. Which is why majority criminal justice reforms revolve around economic or budgetary concerns or crisis, not human growth and development.

In closing, I'm for anything big or small that makes a difference. The importance of reforms, pending abolition, cannot be overstated. However, at the same time we must be aware that reforms do not disturb power dynamics, that do not transfer decision making power back to families and communities, merely manufactures popular consent to social and political arrangements as they currently exist rather than challenging those arrangements.

Hence, criminal justice reforms falsely point out the business officials of existing political, economic, and social arrangements (the myth that capitalist sponsored democracy works), lauding their cultural underpinnings, while neglecting to explore: (1) the many ways that these arrangements and their cultural content foster and continue to produce power imbalances (alienation, grave social inequities and injustices, and gross human rights violations); and (2) the family and community power-sharing available to us.

Simply put, criminal justice reforms will be limited in what they can achieve if we do not at the same time work towards creating a social reality where we do not have to plead and pray, or grovel, or threaten to tear things up to get a reform granted, a reform the state realizes - long before we do - that it is mostly a symbol that will not cost the state any power and will keep us pacified.—

**Mailing Info**  
Lacino Hamilton, 247310  
Marquette Maximum Prison  
1960 US Highway 41 South  
Marquette, MI 49855

# SUBMISSION INFO

NARRATIVE | POETRY | THEORY



## Call for Collaboration

The Right2Vote Campaign is Collaborative, all of the work that I do is activated by and empowered through my readers. This is a family and I hope you all enjoyed this special holiday issue of the Right2Vote Report. These calls for collaboration within this issue are all projects associated with the campaigns that I am organizing nationally and within the state of Michigan. In addition to publishing content raising awareness about the Right2Vote Campaign and its initiatives, the Right2Vote Report accepts contributions from prisoners in the form of articles, artwork and poetry as well as the contribution of stamps.

We also work with other nonprofits and organizers to amplify your voices empowering grassroots organizing networks across the country. This publication and its campaign are about *you* and our most meaningful contributions come from the inside. For readers interested in submitting their work: handwritten typed or printed can be sent to P.O. Box 2278, Detroit, MI 48202 or emailed to: <amanisawari@gmail.com>. Please also write your return address directly onto your submission

### Right2Vote Campaign Artwork

The campaign is accepting artwork submissions for promoting and marketing the New Suffrage Movement. ALL artwork related to the restoring prisoners, parolees and probationers' voting rights will be used to promote the Right2Vote campaign. Please sign your artwork. Artwork will be featured on T-shirts, stickers, buttons, wristbands, tote bags and social media. We are also still looking for an official logo to use for this campaign!

### Michigan "Good Time" Campaign to End Truth-in-Sentencing

This campaign is shifting focus after the New Year into the canvassing phase, meaning we will be collecting 425,059 signatures to add a ballot initiative in favor of repealing Truth-in-Sentencing in Michigan in order to allow prisoners to earn time off of their sentences in the way that prisoners have access to in 47 other states in this country. In Michigan prisoners must serve 100% of their minimum before being eligible to appear before the parole board. In anticipation of a successful campaign we have multiple opportunities for incarcerated supporters to participate. Subscribe to Motivate Michigan's monthly newsletter in support of #PassMIGoodTime. Submit a spoken word piece about the right to redemption to be read at the Campaign Kickoff event, selected participants will be recorded to playback or can select someone to read on their behalf at the event. Selected participants will be compensated, submissions must be mailed by January 15, 2020 in order to be considered. Participate as a inside campaign coordinator. Inside campaign coordinators will be sent multiple canvassing sheets each month and are responsible to organizing other prisoners at their facility to collect petition signatures from their networks.

### VOICED Podcast

Earlier this year Amani Sawari launched a new podcast, Voices Of Incarcerated Citizens EmpowerED (V.O.I.C.Ed), in order to uplift incarcerated voices in conversations around prison abolition, the prison-industrial-slave-complex, new legislation and current events. If you've had problems connecting to the call in line I apologize for the inconvenience, the podcast line was bogged down with spam, but has now been updated, please try again (313) 420-7405. If you are interested in being featured as a voice on this podcast please send a letter to the return address with topics that you would like to discuss as well as the process for registering a phone number on your contact list. All conversations made on the VOICED call line are recorded to be edited for the podcast. Please do not abuse the call line!

### Prisoner Legal Action Network (PLAN)

Sawarimi does not provide legal services, but happily forwards requests for legal representation to partners at the National Lawyers' Guild's Prisoner Legal Action Network (PLAN). Amani Sawari works as apart of the Midwestern PLAN teams serving Michigan and Illinois. Please initiate your legal relationship with PLAN by submitting the form: **LEGAL OBSERVER AFFIDAVITS AFFORD PRISONERS A WAY TO DOCUMENT RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND SEEK PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT** to National Lawyers Guild 132 Nassau St. Room 922, New York, NY 10038

Sawarimi is a platform of expression and empowerment for disenfranchised and marginalized groups, especially members of the African diaspora. Amani Sawari is a writer, founder of Sawarimi and SawariMedia, spokesperson for Jailhouse Lawyers Speak and National Coordinator of their Right2Vote Campaign with the support of the Roddenberry Foundation. We do accept stamps to support the distribution of this publication. You can download and print issues of the Right2Vote Report for distribution at <http://sawarimi.org/right2vote-report>

## Additional Resources

### Civil Survival LLC

Mission: Civil Survival organizes people who have been directly impacted by the criminal justice system to build connections, gain knowledge and increase political participation.

Contact: Tarra Simmons, Executive Director  
727 N. Northlake Way #210  
Seattle, WA 98103

### Initiate Justice

Mission: Initiate Justice has an inside-outside strategy where we prioritize organizing people directly impacted by incarceration, inside and outside prison walls. Contact Taina Vargas-Edmond, Co-founder  
360 E. 2nd St., Suite 710,  
Los Angeles, CA 90012

### Chicago Votes

Mission: Chicago Votes is a non-partisan, non-profit organization building a more inclusive democracy by putting power in the hands of young Chicagoans. We're changing laws to make Chicago and Illinois a better place to be young, and in the process we're making democracy FUN. Contact: Jen Dean, Co Deputy Director  
234 S Wabash Ave,  
Chicago, IL 60604

### New Jersey Institute for Social Justice

Mission: NJISJ is a research and advocacy organization dedicated to the advancement of New Jersey's residents and urban areas. Contact: Aaron Greene, Associate Counsel  
60 Park Pl  
Newark, New Jersey

### Kentuckians for the Commonwealth

Mission: We use direct action to challenge—and change—unfair political, economic and social systems. Our membership is open to all people who are committed to equality, democracy and non-violent change. Contact: Dave Newton, Democracy Organizer  
P.O. Box 1450  
London, Ky. 40743

### MassPOWER Coalition- Emancipation Initiative

Mission: Mass POWER is a grassroots coalition committed to restoring the right to vote for people incarcerated on felony convictions in Massachusetts. Contact: Austin Frizzell  
P.O. Box 912  
Norwood, MA 02062

### Voice of the Experienced (VOTE)

Mission: Through civic engagement and policy reform, we increasingly mobilize a strong group of leaders to transform the movement for the elimination of the carceral state. Contact: Bruce Reilly, Deputy Director  
2022 St. Bernard Ave., Suite 307,  
New Orleans, LA 70117

### Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights & Urban Affairs

Mission: We fight discrimination against all people, but we put special focus on the central role that current and historic race discrimination plays in sustaining inequity. 700 14th St. NW, Ste 400  
Washington, D.C. 20005  
Prisoners' Help Line (collect calls accepted): (202) 775-0323

### National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers (NACDL)

Mission: To serve as a leader, alongside diverse coalitions, in identifying and reforming flaws and inequities in the criminal justice system. 1660 L St. NW, 12th floor  
Washington D.C. 20036  
(202) 872-8600